

A Comparative Character Analysis of Dagny Taggard in Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged and the Woman Superintendent

Queinnise Miller

PhD Student in Educational Leadership

Whitlowe R. Green College of Education

Prairie View A&M University

Prairie View, Texas

Teacher/Department Chair

Alief Independent School District

Houston, Texas

William Allan Kritsonis, PhD

Professor

PhD Program in Educational Leadership

Hall of Honor (2008)

William H. Parker Leadership Academy

Whitlowe R. Green College of Education

Prairie View A&M University

Member of the Texas A&M University System

Prairie View, Texas

Visiting Lecturer (2005)

Oxford Round Table

University of Oxford, Oxford England

Distinguished Alumnus (2004)

College of Education and Professional Studies

Central Washington University

ABSTRACT

Over the years women have played crucial roles in societal leadership. Within the past decade more women have emerged in taking positions of leadership in many areas concerning U.S. education in particularly the highest public position in education, Superintendent. Obtaining, sustaining, and maintaining high positions of power for any career woman does not come without a high price. The caliber and quality of woman who holds such positions of power like Ayn Rand, know that human greatness equals rational achievement irrespective of gender.

Introduction

In Ayn Rand's great novel *Atlas Shrugged*, she introduces a new way of thinking about the good guy bad guy scenario. She opens a new way of thought that challenges the reader to rethink who and what the good and evil of society really is. Through her wonderful and intense character placements she simultaneously expresses to the reader her inner thoughts and philosophy on societal roles and how they effect and impact the inner workings of the world as we know it. In particular, the character Dagny Taggart represents for Ayn Rand her ideal woman, herself without flaws. Dagny possesses qualities that many women who hold high positions within their designated careers such as beautiful, talented, determined, and highly intelligent. Her independent spirit leads her to trust her own judgment over public opinion. Though calmly rational, she is also tremendously passionate about her work and love. She is enormously successful as a woman in a man's world.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to compare the qualities, characteristics, experiences, and barriers faced for Ayn Rand's character Dagny Taggart as "second" in charge, Vice-President in Charge of Operations at Taggart Transcontinental, yet those who know, know she is really in charge, and that of the woman superintendent in the U.S. educational system. This article will summarize the novel *Atlas Shrugged* for the purpose of establishing a foundation for Dagny's character, explore the woman's place in a man's world, take a look at roles generally played by traditional women, career women, and their struggle for balance.

Atlas Shrugged

Atlas Shrugged was one of Ayn Rand's best selling novel which was very controversial about heroine Dagny Taggart's fight to save her transcontinental railroad from collapse. Dagny's efforts lead her to find the man who stopped the motor of the world and to hunt down the destroyer who's leading a strike of the great minds. This man ends up being one in the same, John Galt. The country is in an economic crisis and men are out of work. Other states are becoming people state and are destitute. Yet, Colorado is the last industrial center left. Dagny has to provide the train services needed for import and export, yet her brother tries to stop her by resisting the building of the Rio Norte Line with Rearden Metal. Dagny then decides to start her own company to rebuild the line with Rearden Metal and it is a great success. Dagny and Rearden become lovers. Together they discover a motor in an abandoned factory that runs on static electricity, and they seek the inventor. The government passes new legislation that cripples industry in Colorado. Ellis Wyatt, an oil industrialist, suddenly disappears after setting fire to his wells. Dagny is forced to cut trains, and the situation worsens.

Dagny quits over the new directive, Directive 10-289, is irrational and repressive. It includes a ruling that requires all patents to be signed over to the government. When she learns of a massive accident at the Taggart Tunnel, she returns to her job. She receives a letter from the scientist she had hired to help rebuild the motor, and fears he will be the next target of the destroyer. In an attempt to stop him from disappearing, she follows him in an airplane and crashes in the mountains. When she wakes up, she finds herself in a remote valley where all the retired industrialists are living. They are on strike, calling it a strike of the mind. There, she meets John Galt, who turns out to be both the destroyer and the man who built the motor. She falls in love with him, but she cannot give up her railroad, and she leaves the valley.

The politicians no longer even pretend to work for the public good. Just as the head of state prepares to give a speech on the economic situation, John Galt takes over the airwaves and delivers a lengthy address to the country, laying out the terms of the strike he has organized. In desperation, the government seeks Galt to make him their economic dictator. Dagny inadvertently leads them to him, and they take him prisoner. But Galt refuses to help them, even after he is tortured. Finally, Dagny and the strikers rescue him in an armed confrontation with guards. They return to the valley, where Dagny finally joins the strike. Soon, the country's collapse is complete and the strikers prepare to return.

A Man's World

In the book *Atlas Shrugged*, Dagny unsurprisingly was the only woman that did not operate in the world of women, yet set a presence in the world of men. Today this is a growing phenomenon where women are becoming more visible, productive, and crucial to a world that once denied women of this privilege.

Like many women today, Dagny Taggart, infused and impacted a world where men generally ruled and made all of the decisions. In the 1950's women did not generally work outside of the home, let alone hold positions of power especially in the industrial business. Today, in the nation's 14,000-odd district superintendents are overwhelmingly white and male. The most recent data from the American Association of School Administrators show that in 2000, 15 percent of superintendents were women and 5 percent were members of racial or ethnic minorities of either sex. A forthcoming book on women superintendents reports that they now make up 18 percent of the pool (Gewertz, 2006).

Dagny worked harder for Taggart Transcontinental than any one person had the capability of doing. She made all the decisions, stayed at work the latest, and ran all of operations, with no recognition or title. Eventually she became tired with the constant struggle, that she actually contemplated life with out that in which her entire life had been built around, Taggart Transcontinental.

“Dagny was thirty-two years old, when she told James Taggart that she would resign. She had run the Operating Department for the past three years, without title, credit or authority. She was defeated by loathing for the hours, the days, the

nights she had to waste circumventing the inference of Jim's friend who bore the title of Vice-President in Charge of Operation. The man had no policy, and any decision he made was always hers, but he made it only after he had made every effort to make it impossible. What she delivered to her brother was an ultimatum. He grasped, "But, Dagny, you're a woman! A woman as Operating Vice-President? It's unheard of! The Board won't consider it!" "Then I'm through," she answered.....She never understood why the Board of Directors voted unanimously to make her Vice-President in Charge of Operation."

Female superintendents face similar experiences and prejudices within their positions as well. Some educators and scholars disagree about whether being female influences the way a superintendent is perceived. Yet, many female superintendents suggest that it does. For example, a white man who once approached then Superintendent Gerry House after a Memphis, Tenn., school budget meeting was smiling, and his tone of voice was joking. But what she heard in his question wasn't funny. "You sure you can handle this budget of \$500 million?" he asked, as Ms. House recalls it (Gewertz, 2006).

The Traditional Women

According to the Associated Content, from an evolutionary point of view, before technology empowered women with the ability to survive independent of men, the role of the man and woman was well defined. Traditional roles of the family had been established out of necessity instead of by the 'social environment', because the environment in early times dictated the 'society' of those living in it.

This is no longer true. The women of prehistory were the glue that held the community together. They tended to the domestic issues that were the by product of the propagation of the species and it remains their responsibility even now. The United States is founded on stories of white women and women of color whose work to manage a home and family affairs has never been described as leadership, though it was crucial to the survival and success of all (Grogan, 2005).

Most times, the traditional woman takes great pride in her home, her family (husband and children), her appearance and often social event, status, and prestige. This woman normally finds great joy in ensuring that her home is a place of peace and stability. She finds joy in making sure that everyone within her direct range of influence is happy and well taken care of. She makes voluntary sacrifices for the benefit of her home, irrespective to her own personal wants, needs, or desires. The traditional women also take their job at home very seriously and will do whatever it takes to ensure that things are in order.

Atlas Shurgged did a great job representing the traditional woman in characters Lillian Rearden, Hank Rearden's mother, and Cheryl Taggart. Neither of these women had jobs outside the home save Cheryl Taggart before marrying James Taggart, Dagny's brother. Each depended on the money and security of their husbands or son. The idea of

either of them creating a life independent of a man, was would never be an option, and each of them would be willing to do anything to ensure that security.

In today's society, the number of traditional home makers has declined drastically with the increase of the cost of living, women everyday are forced to work outside the home to supplement their husbands income. This phenomenon of the surge of female in the work place has created the age of the career woman.

The Career Woman

U.S. women have a history of leading in ways that have not always been labeled "leadership". The women who were instrumental in managing their families and property while their men folk went to war or while their husbands and fathers learned how to govern the country, are excellent examples of this (Grogan, 2005).

As the times changed, and society shifted with this change more traditional women began to emerge from the home front to the outside working world. This transition was difficult for some, yet for others it was an easy transition. Margaret Grogan argues that U.S. women have always been 'leaders' in the sense that their managing of diverse people and unpredictable events is leadership just as it is leadership for men to navigate the unknown and often treacherous waters of settling in strange lands and dealing with conditions of war.

Like Dagny Taggard and that of many women superintendents in U.S. education they have distinct characteristics and qualities that make them and other real life individual great heroines within their field of work. They are very knowledgeable about the work that they do which allows them to perform as an expert. They often times have a unswerving dedication to truth, regardless of social opinion, and this dedication to truth allows them to discover new knowledge and create new opportunities. Often times the career woman is driven by passion accompanied with a very distinct strong personality. Unfortunately she has to be slightly aggressive because of the constant necessity to prove that she is capable of performing the duties given to her as a man equal to her could perform.

Out of all the men of the mind that vanished to Atlantis in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shurgged*, Dagny was the only women who was apart of this elite group and ironically the last to join the group. This is also true with the percentage of women who are superintendents. 82 percent of districts are still headed by men, more men than women head up the largest districts, but women are there too. Women are in large districts, urban districts, suburban districts, and rural districts. They are demonstrating that they can manage operations that are staffed by many as well as by few (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

The Struggle for Balance

Some say that women are blessed with the ability to multi-task in many things that they do. While this may hold some truths, this can be difficult for women who are

trying to attempt balancing both home and career. Depending on where women are in their lives, marriage and children become more of a priority than advancing within their careers. On the other hand, the longer they wait the more difficult it is to reach their full career potential. The balance between the traditional and career woman roles is not an impossible feat, yet it definitely doesn't come without a price to pay. As times have changed there are more women who are solely career driven, yet innately most women do desire family or to experience love and life outside of the work place.

A superintendent in Atlanta Public School, Beverly Hall, stated "If you are a younger woman with responsibilities for raising children or those associated with being a wife, you really have to think whether you have to risk neglecting your family to devote the hours to the job" (Silverman, 2004). More women than most are faced with this problem not only in the position of superintendent but also in other high offices in school administration. Few women receive the necessary mentoring, even fewer women of color are encouraged to pursue the job, and the pressures of combining family responsibilities with administrative ones take their toll on marriages and career opportunities (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Dagny Taggart was not plagued with this struggle of family and career. She was a woman who knew from the time she was nine years old that her passion and desire to one day run Taggart Transcontinental Railroad would always take priority. Unfortunately, for most women this is not a reality. Aside from the fact that Dagny was a pure intellect and produced results faster and better than any man in her field including her brother, she was still in fact a woman, and a beautiful woman. Women have natural desires that even Dagny could not fight. Though her romantic liaisons with the three men of ability Francisco d'Anconia, Hank Rearden, and John Galt she was able to tap into this component of herself. Her sexual relationships with these men allowed Dagny to explore the feminine side of her. Dagny while otherwise invariably strong and assertive seems, in some scenes, to have a submissive attitude to the men in her life. She manifested a traditional role in Hank Rearden's ability to subdue and soften her with gifts and in sexual encounters in which all three men use physical violence which Dagny seems to enjoy. Irrespective of this, Dagny never experienced conflict between the traditional her and the career her which she displayed well in her exposure of her a Hank Rearden affair.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion women of the world are continuously wearing different hats but at the end of the day, it is balance that is most important. Dagny Taggart and the woman superintendents share similar fundamental qualities that have resulted in high positions of power within their line of work and successful reigns. Like Dagny, women superintendents represent a very small percentage of all district superintendents. Like Dagny, these same women often need to prove their abilities more because of the fact that they are women. Finally, like Dagny, these women struggle to find balance between their traditional self and career self. While this struggle looks different for all women, it is still in fact a harsh reality.

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